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## Westerners to seek more funds to meet federal lands tax gap

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WASHINGTON - Western Congress members are demanding the federal government make good on a commitment to compensate counties and local governments that lose tax revenue because of federal land inside their borders.

They will go to the House floor today, seeking to add \$12 million to the program they say has been underfunded for more than a decade, costing communities more than \$1.1 billion.

"The Western states are being treated unfairly because of the huge amounts of federal lands. [This] is only one piece of that," said Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, one of several members pushing for the additional funds.

Nationally, 1,900 communities in every state but Rhode Island received Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) money last year, but the bulk of the funds go to Western states, where vast areas are owned by the federal government. President Bush has proposed cutting \$26 million from the PILT funding, leaving the program with \$200 million. The target for the program is \$311 million.

That prompted an outcry, particularly from Western members. Cannon suggested at the time that the White House find a map and look at who helped re-elect the president.

The House added \$30 million to the president's proposal. If the Western House members are able to add \$12 million to the bill today, the federal government would be meeting 80 percent of the target for the program, the highest level since it was started 27 years ago.

The new PILT money would come from the Interior Department's management budget, which is used for salaries, hearings and appeals and operations. Interior was slated for a \$25 million increase next year.

Counties use the money for firefighting, police protection, school and road construction and search-and-rescue operations on federal lands.

For example, in Utah, \$428,000 in PILT money was used last month by the Garfield County Sheriff's office in a search for two missing BYU students who disappeared in slot canyons near Escalante.

Both were found dead.

Last year, Utah counties received more than \$19 million in PILT money, about \$9 million less than it would have received if Congress fully funded the program.

"This program was a promise to counties that they would be compensated for land lost to their local tax base," said Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah. "Counties continue to provide services, such as law enforcement and search and rescue on public lands and PILT funding is a critical source of revenue at a time when county budgets are stretched thin."

Support for adding to the PILT funding also appears strong in the Senate, where a diverse group of 60 senators, ranging from Republican Sens. Orrin Hatch and Bob Bennett to Democratic Sens. Harry Reid and John Kerry, recently urged restoration of cut funding.